

ON THE HIGH WIRES OF THE IMAGINATION

by Henry Beissel

I write verse, prose and drama. I deliberately use the term 'verse'. Because poetry is for me the quality which the three genres have in common. Verse, prose and drama are forms of poetry. What distinguishes them is technical. What they share in their essence - an associative, metaphorical language in which to embody something of the non-linear multi-dimensionality of life itself. I am a poet not because I write verse but because I use the organic language of the imagination. The process of literary creation is akin to child-bearing. Except that it requires more conscious effort and acquired skills to engender the birth of a viable verbal being. But that's what a successful work of fiction is.

Why bother to make these efforts and acquire such skills? That's the question: 'Why do you write?' It's asked often - of me, of other writers. Word has got around that poetry is not a lucrative pursuit (in fact, the average income of Canadian poets from their craft is well below the poverty line!) and that it communicates with a shrinking audience and readership. So, why write? If no one else asks me the question I ask it of myself, every now and then, as I lock myself away in my study with a sheaf of blank paper instead of indulging easier pleasures of the flesh or of the mind. The answer reveals something essential about the work of the writer who gives it. I think it's the best way in which a writer can introduce himself. Through his working hypothesis. Which is at once a confession and a commitment.

I have three reasons for writing. The first, for which the other two might well be mere rationalizations, is the simplest and yet the most elusive. Writing is an existential

necessity for me. Like breathing. It doesn't come as easily, but it seems as natural. I never decided to become a writer. Somewhere in my late twenties I discovered that writing was the most consistent activity of my life till then. I had done it for almost as long as I could remember, and almost as unself-consciously as breathing. It occurred to me that life had committed me to poetry. I had little choice in the matter. Except to return the compliment. Writing is the way in which my mind breathes.

That realization should've been enough. But I wanted to know what it meant. I still do. But the search yielded my second reason. I discovered, once again, what I had known intuitively for a long time: the impotence of discursive language (the language in which I am addressing you now) to come to terms with reality and experience. Bound into the straightjacket of grammar, discursive language at its best can barely satisfy the dictates of logic. The dictates of life defy logic. We all live in many dimensions, some of them reconcilable only in the continuous balancing-act of the individual personality. Only the poet's metaphorical language can create verbal analogues to living organisms in which that balancing-act is performed on the high wires of the imagination. I realized that the act of poetry was for me the only way that I knew to give unity, order, meaning to a world crumbling into chaos on all sides. Writing as an act of self-definition and self-preservation. Poetry as a means of preserving my sanity in a lunatic age. As an exploration of non-rational, paradoxical reality. The process of literary creation is for me an essay into the mystery that surrounds us, precisely as is (or should be) every reader's first involvement with it.

Valid as these reasons are, they've always seemed to me too self-contained, too self-centered. The act of writing doesn't have to be justified, but a writer's needs

(time, privacy, money, etc.) do and can. Their justification lies in the public service the writer provides. Writing is first and foremost a form of communication - the most quint-essentially human form. If there is no one a poet wishes to communicate with, silence would be the better part of wisdom. For me, the reader is as essential to writing as the writer. Without the reader, all writing is a series of meaningless ink marks on paper. I write because I want to say something to somebody. For the most part, I don't know, either before or after, who that somebody is. My books are a one-sided correspondence with anonymous recipients who will take from them what they wish or what they can find - despair, consolation, provocation, delight...

Nor does it matter how many recipients there are. Only the most puerile among us measure their love by the number of partners upon whom they've bestowed their animal favours. In literature, as in love (and there's a connection between the two which this is not the place to ponder), it is the depth and integrity of a commitment that count, not its bubble-gum elasticity. A poet's circle of readers is determined by the air his mind breathes and by the honesty and clarity of his voice.

All of which presupposes that a writer has something to say, in the first place. This is a treacherous issue, especially in an age of catastrophic upheavals. Because a writer is always at the crossroads of moral and aesthetic impulses, neither of which can be allowed to determine his path. At least, that's how I experience it. I have always found it difficult to refuse the temptation of making my voice as a poet proclaim my convictions as a man. It is a constant struggle. No writer can expect to be taken seriously if he ignores the political turbulence of our time. The fate of the human race seems to have fallen into the hands of certifiable madmen

everywhere. It is obligatory for us to speak out clearly. But I refuse to make my voice as a writer the megaphone for politicians, even the politician inside me. Poetry must not and cannot be turned into agitprop. That would be like administering a dose of cancer cells to a patient already stricken with the disease.

While it is inevitable that the totality of my personality, my experiences and convictions, create the optic through which I view all things, it is not my function as a writer to proclaim or champion ideologies. I'm not looking for disciples. In fact, discipleship is diametrically opposed to the state of being a true poet seeks: individual freedom based on the acceptance of responsibility for one's world. On that score, I see the writer's function as one of bringing into focus, clarifying, making transparent the central issues of existing in this world which life and people go to such incredible lengths to obscure, distort and conceal. The Greek word for truth ('aletheia') means 'to bring out of hiding'. I think it aptly defines the primary object of all writing: truth - to bring out into the open.

And so the circle connecting you and I through the poem with the world is closed. My books are intended not only as adventures of the mind, explorations of the invisible coherence of reality, but also as invitations to the reader to become free through an expanding awareness of the true nature of things and a firm commitment to a more joyful and more compassionate future: Without such a creative conspiracy between poet and reader it is doubtful whether we'll have any future at all.